Submission to Parliamentary Inquiry into Loneliness and Social Isolation.

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Dear Committee Members,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide feedback for the Inquiry into Social Isolation and loneliness in Queensland.

Logan East Community Neighbourhood Association, Inc. (LECNA) governs and operates the Logan East Community Neighbourhood Centre in Springwood, Logan City. The activities of the Centre primarily serve the parts of Logan City adjacent to Springwood but aspects of them also serve the wider communities of Logan City and beyond. We offer an array of services and programs and provide a space for community members to contribute and give back to their local community. We have 15 successful groups and programs offered weekly which aim to reduce social isolation and loneliness and we provide a space for hire for others to use to socially connect. We have at least 1500 individual attendances a month to our centre for regular groups and programs. We strongly believe that abating social isolation and loneliness strategies need to be place based, interactive and well resourced.

LECNA's motto is "Building Better Lives". For over 30 years our Centre has dedicated itself to helping to improve the lives of everyone in our community by encouraging social participation and community engagement.

Throughout the changes we have seen both as an organisation and in the community, we have remained true to the purpose and mission:
- To be an inclusive organisation that supports and encourages participation and contribution of all community members to improving community life.
- To advocate and provide for the charitable needs of the community, and to preserve a place that encourages participation and builds relationships within the local community, providing information and referrals, assistance and services to fulfil community needs.

The Management Committee/Board of LECNA welcome this Inquiry and its intention to identify the nature and extent of the impact of social isolation and loneliness, and

the role, scope and priorities of a state-wide strategy to address social isolation and loneliness. We recognise that this inquiry has been initiated in response to grass-roots process of community listening and community organising.

Response to Terms of Reference

We have organise our views, knowledge and recommendations on this issue in accordance with the terms of reference stated in the submission guidelines:

A. The nature and extent of the impact of social isolation and loneliness in Queensland, including but not limited to:
- *identification of and consultation with vulnerable and disadvantaged individuals or groups at significant risk across the life course*
- *the interplay of COVID-19 with this issue*

18.5% of the Logan population are in solo households and 20% were single parent families according to the 2016 census, groups which are recognized as vulnerable to loneliness, though we see it as an issue not confined only to them.   The staff and volunteers who interact with community members consistently report that loneliness and isolation can be seen to have a negative impact on a wide range of the wellbeing of the people who access the activities of our Centre. This is certainly true of the approximately 1500 members of the community who access our 15 or so programs designed to promote social inclusion. It is perhaps even more true of the hundreds of people who we seek to provide with brief intervention assistance to when they access our programs for people dealing with the traumas caused by social disadvantage and poverty such as our Emergency Relief, No Interest Loans (NILS), Police Referrals, Financial Advice and Counselling activities. The focus of our brief interventions being to identifying major issue underlying the problem they present with, such as need assistance with food or paying bills, and then to put them in touch with ways of mitigating these deeper issues.

Another theme emerging from the anecdotal evidence reported by our staff and volunteers is the fact that experiences of loneliness and isolation are not confined to any age group or sector of the community. It is also evident that while the impact upon some people is highly apparent with people reporting high levels of depression, anxiety and other health issues that sometimes pose an immediate threat to their lives, others experience impacts at a lesser level which though they are not as severe can still diminish the quality of their lives considerably.

From our considerable interactions with other community sector organisations in Logan and throughout Queensland and beyond that they have similar anecdotal evidence of the impact that loneliness and social isolation have in exacerbating the impact of other contributing factors to lack of wellbeing in people's lives and vice-verse.

We are also aware that this conclusion drawn from anecdotal evidence in consistent with and supported by the findings of a considerable weight of academic research such as that of the University of Queensland's School of Psychology around "Social Cure".

B. The causes and drivers of social isolation and loneliness, including those

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unique to Queensland

As we have stated above it is clear from the anecdotal evidence reported by workers at LECNA that loneliness and social isolation interact with a range of other factors in people's lives such as poverty, housing and employment insecurity in the complex milieu of people's lives.

An observation made by many of those at LECNA who interact with members of the community is that there is a link between loneliness and time of disruption in people's lives such as job loss, relocation and in some cases loss of housing, family separation, leaving school or other education and retirement. In a community like Logan with a higher number of people who have migrated from other locations in Australia and the rest o the world significant disruptions are more common than in other regions of Qld and other parts of Australia.

In the past two years there is a strong view at LECNA that there is no doubt that the disruptions to people's lives caused by the Covid 19 pandemic have added to and exacerbated the negative impacts of loneliness and isolation in the lives of many people.

C. The protective factors known to mitigate social isolation and loneliness

Based on the observations we have referred to above the staff and management committee/board of LECNA see the following as ways of mitigating the impacts of loneliness and social isolation
  i.   Bringing people together to do things together
  ii. Assisting people in dealing with the kinds of social pressure caused by factors such as such as poverty, housing and employment insecurity in the complex milieu of people's lives that interact with and exacerbate the impact that loneliness and isolation have of people's wellbeing. Here we again draw attention to the effectiveness of the brief intervention work that we do at LECNA.
  iii. Helping people to be better prepared for and to manage the disruptions that they face in their lives
  iv. Fostering a strong policy dialogue in the community at all levels on how best to mitigate the negative impacts of loneliness and isolation and ensuring that the voices of the people most affected are heard and acted upon.

D. The benefits of addressing social isolation and loneliness, examples of successful initiatives undertaken nationally and internationally and how to measure social isolation and loneliness in Queensland to determine if implemented strategies are effective.

  1. LECNA strongly commends to the Inquiry the approach taken to mitigating the impacts of loneliness and social isolation by us and many other Neighbourhood and Community Centres in Queensland as well as other parts of Australia and the World. It is a community development approach of bringing people together to pursue their common interests. In particular we bring people together to do four things:

i.   To help each other, especially those in the community who currently have special needs. We all have special needs at certain times and in certain circumstance.
ii. To pursue their interests and do things together that they enjoy.
iii. To have a voice in democratic processes of the community – Have say in decisions that affect them. Advocating and campaigning for what they think is best for their families and their community
iv. To build social capital learn and grow together, building their ability to do the things they want to do, to build their capacity to face what life throws at them and to make a contribution to the community and society

To put these principles into practice LECNA runs social inclusion programs aimed directly at mitigating the impact of social isolation and loneliness. We also run programs targeted directly at assisting people facing disadvantage and trauma such as Emergency Relief, No Interest Loans, Police Referral Intervention Assistance, Counselling, Financial Advice and Counselling, and Mediation. And, as an active member of the Qld. Community Alliance, partner of the Logan Together collective impact initiative and through our participation in a range of community sector networks we and our members play a role in the decision making processes that impact upon our community.

LECNA holds monthly volunteer lunches, inviting volunteers to socialize, share a meal and raise any issues or concerns. We ensure that volunteers in our centre feel a sense of ownership and are acknowledged for all that they do. This is also another great opportunity for our volunteers who live alone or experience social isolation to experience further connection.

In addition to existing services and programs, LECNA seeks opportunities to fill gaps and identify local needs in relation to abating social isolation and loneliness. An example of this is in 2019, in response to the observation of an increasing number of seniors accommodation services in the region, LECNA got funding to deliver a highly successful Welcoming Seniors project. It was observed that many seniors were moving to the region (often solo) with few local networks or connection or knowledge of how to engage with community. While including a number of morning teas and skill sharing workshops led by local seniors, the project culminated in a Welcoming Seniors booklet sharing the myriad of activities involving social connection in the Logan region for seniors.

Below are two examples of case studies of people who access our community centre to abate social isolation and loneliness.

> *Kerry is a retired local with Multiple Sclerosis whose kids are adults and husband works full-time. She was bored and lonely and would spend her days gambling (pokies) and this was kept secret for over a year from her family. She was very lonely and socially isolated and lacked purpose. When finally her husband found out about her gambling addiction, she got help. She had passed our community centre a number of times, but hadn't connected in. She turned up and everyone*

was very friendly and welcoming. She started volunteering and tried on phones in back reception, but didn't like that as much. Then one day, she was asked to train up to volunteer supporting people in the centres Emergency Relief program. She did this afew days a week for a number of years and also attended the Seniors Cards Group and Legacy, filling her days and time with social connection. Since Covid in early 2020, Kerry stepped back from volunteering in ER as she is immunocompromised. She still runs the Seniors Cards group, attends legacy, Barb's art class and Prize Bingo. Her life has simply transformed with the social connections she has made at the centre.

Samilya has had a biography written about her. "Not Forgotten" and is a survivor of childhood abuse and trauma. She gave evidence into the Commission of Inquiry into the abuse of children in QLD institutions. She was diagnosed with Dissociative Identity Disorder at the age of 51. Her mental health affected her ability to hold down jobs. When Samilya came across LECNA in 2010 she was on the verge of ending her life. She rang the centre on a whim and was on the phone for 2 hours with a staff member who heard her story. She had been very socially isolated and lonely and would rarely leave her house. When she first came to volunteer, she shadowed this staff member around and occasionally hid under the tables. After some time, she found her swing and now volunteers 4 days a week managing the statistics and running back reception and is a great help to the loans team and trains new volunteers. Without LECNA, Sami would probably no longer be with us and without Sami, LECNA would not be able to operate as well as we do. She has gained confidence, social connection, and a sense of purpose.

We submit that the stories of Kerry and Samilya demonstrate clearly the benefits of our community development approach and the capacity it has to help people build better lives and in doing so enhance the social capital of the community. We are aware of innumerable others in our LECNA community with similar stories.

It is our view that our work in this field would benefit by the development of easily accessible quantitative instruments to complement what we believe is ample qualitative anecdotal data of this kind. It would assist us in not only identifying the scope of the issue in our area but also in measuring the efficacy of our programs.

2. We also refer the committee to research done by the Queensland Families and Communities Association (QFCA), the peak body for neighbourhood and community centres in Queensland, to evaluate the impact that centre like LECNA's have upon the wellbeing of people (https://www.qfca.org.au/).

3. In addition we commend reference to the co-design work currently being undertaken by the Ministry of Housing and Communities to identify ways in which the effectiveness of the neighbourhood and community centre network in Queensland can be enhanced.

4. As members of the Queensland Community Alliance (QCA), the LECNA management committee/board is also very much aware of the world-leading social prescribing Ways to Wellness network in the Mount Gravatt area of Brisbane and the central role played in it by our colleagues at the Mt Gravatt Community Centre. We are aware of reports of extremely promising interim results and the implications that the final findings of the research phase of this project might have for how we and other Neighbourhood and Community Centres can play in enhancing our efforts to mitigate the impacts of loneliness and isolation in the future.

E. How current investment by the Queensland Government, other levels of government, the non-government, corporate and other sectors may be leveraged to prevent, mitigate and address the drivers and impacts of social isolation and loneliness across Queensland, including:
- ***services and programs such as health and mental health, transport, housing, education, employment and training, sport and recreation, community services and facilities, digital inclusion, volunteering, the arts and culture, community development, and planning for accessible, inclusive and connected communities***
- ***targeted support to vulnerable and disadvantaged groups and those most at risk***

1. The Queensland State Government has the infrastructure footprint with community centres to play a core role in abating social isolation and loneliness. There is no need to reinvent the wheel. LECNA's 2020 return to the QLD Families Community Association survey identified we connect in 314 people on average a week, with the value of $429, 319 in improved quality of life through social connection. These stats and this story will be found from community centres across QLD, who have not seen a funding increase in decades and have baseline funding of around $134 000 a year. We need to urgently see an increase Neighbourhood Centre Investment to a minimum of 2.5 workers plus overheads per centre to ensure adequate resourcing of place-based pro-connection responses. Imagine what can be achieved with adequate resourcing - Neighbourhood Centres would have the knowledge to respond with even more solutions unique to their local community and will provide further long-term benefits. Increases in wellbeing and self-esteem enable people to feel better about themselves, find a purpose, form friendships and connections and for some even find meaningful employment. It is important to acknowledge the multi-faceted nature of this problem and the community solutions, which span Government Departments and require a whole-of-government approach. This includes the incredibly transformative and highly effective work of community centres who have been siloed into the

Department of Communities, when the work we do affects health, women and child safety, housing and employment and training. The question is, where are the slices of the pie for poor underfunded community centres from these Departments, while we do their work for them?

In addition to a longer-term strategy approach for funding, we advocate for the campaign of the Queensland Community Alliance in funding a Brief Intervention Worker now in certain busy community centres in Queensland, including ours, to adequately meet community needs.

2. We are also of the view that there is a need for a whole of government and community response to the issue of loneliness and isolation. We would like to see strong leadership from the Queensland Government at the highest level.

However, we also believe that it is most important to place a strong focus upon local place-based approaches and initiatives. As partners in the Logan Together collective impact initiative we are aware of the advantages of approaches that focus not only impact but also things like:

- Social capital and civic engagement of local people, built through proven strategies that nurture the capacity for leadership to emerge amongst community members.
- Service design that is community-led, where service providers are co-designing and co-delivering with the community and each other to ensure the provision of culturally competent and valued services that:
  a. respond to community need,
  b. work in support of family and community aspirations,
  c. are tailored to the local context, and
  d. drive learning and knowledge sharing.
- Assuring that First Nations people and communities will experience positive changes to their lives and experiences, noting the strong alignment with the National Agreement on Closing the Gap reforms

We note that these are features of goals of the current Stronger Places, Stronger People collaboration agreement between Logan Together and the Federal and Qld. Governments

Recommendations

Logan East Community Neighbourhood Association, Inc. submit the following recommendations. They align with but vary from those to the Inquiry from the Queensland Community Alliance and the QLD Families community Association, of which we are a member of both.

a. Community Neighbourhood Centres as appropriately funded key social infrastructure –See our response to Term of Reference D above

We submit that Community Neighbourhood Centres adopting a community development approach focused upon build social capital be considered as key social infrastructure, which should play a central role in Queensland State-wide strategy to address social isolation and loneliness.

Effective community neighbourhood centres reduce social isolation right across a local community. They build exactly the type of group relationships proven to strengthen social identity and therefore reduce social isolation. They are the right scale to build these relationships in ways that address local needs and local nuances for local communities.

Despite this, Community Neighbourhood Centres only receive a yearly average of $134,000 in Neighbourhood Centre funding per centre from the Queensland Government. This has not increased over several decades, effectively amounting to a cut in local services, programs and support to our local communities every year as centres are asked to do more with less.

We recommend that Community Neighbourhood Centres be considered as frontline services, and that their funding be increased accordingly. We see a particular need for financial support for our brief intervention work as described above which has the capacity to help us provide support targeted at loneliness and isolation. Centres like ours currently get no funding to do this kind of work. We need to urgently see an increase Neighbourhood Centre Investment to a minimum of 2.5 workers plus overheads per centre to ensure adequate resourcing of place-based pro-connection responses.

By greater investment into place-based community centres, the Queensland Government has the opportunity to invest in citizen-led, place-based solutions. Token solutions to loneliness and social isolation by "cookie cutting" more social groups across the state will not address the epidemic. Local communities need to be empowered through a place-based community development framework to work together to find solutions from the ground up and every community is different.

b. *Expand Ways to Wellness –See our response to Term of Reference D above*

The Ways to Wellness program is a world-leading social prescribing network in the Mount Gravatt area of Brisbane. It has been developed through a community organising process led by the Qld Community Alliance in collaboration with University of Queensland, and funded by the Queensland Government.

We submit that social prescribing should be developed as a key pillar of the Queensland State-wide strategy to address social isolation and loneliness. Ways to Wellness builds upon the experience of social prescribing overseas by more deeply linking health providers, community initiatives, and isolated people. Further information can be obtained from Mt Gravatt Community Centre which coordinates the project.

We at LECNA would dearly love to be funded to play a similar role to that of Mt Gravatt Community Centre in the pilot project. We believe that it would enhance our current brief intervention work considerably.

c. *Adopt a Research and Evidence Based Approach –See our response to Term of Reference A and D above*

We recommend that the research like that by University of Queensland's School of Psychology around "Social Cure" should be a central reference point and underpinning of the new Queensland State-wide strategy to address social isolation and loneliness.

This U Q research is brought together in *"The New Psychology of Health: Unlocking the Social Cure"* In addition to this book we refer the committee to a summary and further detailed references at: https://stories.uq.edu.au/research/impact/2020/a-social-cure-for-better-health/

We see a particular and urgent need for means of collecting and analyzing data as way for quantifying both the extent of loneliness and isolation as an issue in our area and of measuring the effectiveness of our attempts to mitigate it.

> **d. Involve community leaders including those from first nations and multicultural communities in leadership and co-design of relevant initiatives –See our response to Term of Reference E above**

We submit that addressing loneliness and social isolation will be best addressed by a network local placed based community led initiatives strongly supported by the whole of government. We commend the approach being taken in Stronger Places, Stronger People initiatives around Australia such as the Logan Together one of which we are partners.

We further submit that there will need to be particular need for these kinds of approach approaches to put an emphasis on putting first nations first and including multicultural communities. The Queensland Government should engage community leaders in these areas as agents of leadership who co-design effective initiatives. Community leaders and community associations should be funded adequately to do this work.

> **e. Creation of a ministerial portfolio for social isolation and loneliness –See our response to Term of Reference E above**

We encourage the creation of a ministerial portfolio which will help to maintain this issue as a priority issue on the political agenda. This will help strengthen state government action, provide a platform for federal lobbying, and raise media and public awareness. Please note the UK model of a Minister for Loneliness.

> **f. Community Hearings –See our response to Term of Reference E above**

We encourage the committee to conduct community hearings hosted by civil society organisations (charities, ethnic associations, faith organisations, unions) that are engaged on the issues of social isolation and loneliness. It is important that the committee hear directly from people who are isolated and lonely, which is difficult in a written format or through centralised hearings.